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INDOCHINA: CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

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NIE - 5

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NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

INDOCHINA: CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

NIE-5

The intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force participated in the preparation of this estimate and concur in it. This paper is based on information available on 28 December 1950.

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INDOCHINA: CURRENT SITUATION AND PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

CONCLUSIONS

1. The French position* in Indochina is critically endangered by the Viet Minh, a Communist movement that has exploited native nationalism. The Chinese Communist regime is already furnishing the Viet Minh materiel, training and technical assistance.

Chinese Communist troops are already present in Tonkin in some strength. If this aid continues and French strength and military resources are not substantially increased above those presently programmed, the Viet Minh probably can drive the French out of North Viet Nam (Tonkin) within six to nine months. French loss of Tonkin, even assuming the evacuation of French forces in substantial numbers, would jeopardize the French position in the remainder of Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia.

2. Under these circumstances there is only a slight chance that the French can maintain their military position long enough to build up an independent Vietnamese government and an effective national army which might win the support of non-Communist nationalists, and, in conjunction with French forces, contain the Viet Minh. For these and other reasons there are grounds for questioning the French will to remain in Indochina.

3. The intervention of Chinese Communist troops in force in support of the Viet Minh

*Throughout this paper, for purposes of brevity, the words "French position" refer to that of the three Associated States supported by the French.

would render the military position of the French untenable. At present there are about 185,000 Chinese Communist troops in the Tonkin border area, and approximately half of these could be committed to operations in Indochina. Even a relatively small number of Chinese Communist troops (25,000-50,000) would enable the Communist forces to drive the French out of Tonkin in a relatively short time.

4. Direct intervention by Chinese Communist troops may occur at any time. It may have already begun (see para. 1). It is almost certain to occur in strength whenever there is danger either that the Viet Minh will fail to attain its military objective of driving the French out of Indochina, or that the Bao Dai government is succeeding in undermining the support of the Viet Minh. The scale of Chinese Communist intervention, however, would be limited mainly by anti-Communist activities in China and by Chinese military commitments elsewhere.

5. The expulsion of the French by the Viet Minh, with or without Chinese Communist intervention, would almost certainly lead to the transformation of Indochina into a Communist satellite.

6. We believe that control of Indochina by the Viet Minh would eventually entail Communist control of all mainland Southeast Asia in the absence of effective Western assistance to other countries of the area.

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~~SECRET~~**DISCUSSION**

1. The French position in Indochina is precarious. Confronted with rebellion by a strong Communist movement that has exploited native nationalism (the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh), the French have tried to weaken it by winning over non-Communist nationalists to support a semi-autonomous, pro-French government under native leadership (the Viet Nam government under Bao Dai). Concessions to nationalist sentiment, leading toward full sovereignty for the Bao Dai Government, have been forthcoming so slowly and with such seeming reluctance on the part of the French that the Bao Dai Government has not in fact won a strong nationalist following in any quarter. As a result, the French so far have been unable to undermine the political strength of the Viet Minh.

2. At the conclusion of the Pau Conference in late November 1950, the French made a new, intensive effort to convince the Vietnamese that the powers of government would be turned over to them as rapidly as possible. The French agreed to establish an independent Army of Viet Nam with Bao Dai, in "supreme command," responsible only to the French High Command in Indochina. According to this plan French officers and cadres would be employed by the Vietnam Government, wear Vietnamese uniforms, and be subject to Bao Dai's command. It is too early to judge what the effect of this new French bid for native support will be. Even though Vietnamese suspicions of French good faith should be overcome, and Bao Dai should develop qualities of leadership hitherto unrevealed, it would be well over a year before an effective Vietnamese army could be organized, trained, and equipped and before broad political support for Bao Dai could be consolidated.

3. The armed forces of the Viet Minh (approximately 225,000 troops, of which 93,000 are well-armed regulars) have for some time been successfully contesting French military control in many regions of Indochina and re-

cently have captured key French outposts and inflicted heavy losses on French forces in the northern border area adjoining China. In the critical area, Tonkin, where the French now hold mainly the Red River Delta area and a narrow strip along the coast, 55,000 French regular Army troops are opposing 62,000 Viet Minh regulars. The magnitude of the French military effort currently required in the whole of Indochina can be inferred from the following facts: (a) the French have 147,000 army regulars deployed throughout Indochina, and in addition maintain 200,000 native forces engaged in security tasks, para-military duties, and local defense; (b) the regular army in Indochina comprises 49% of France's career enlisted personnel, 20% of its regular army officers, and 28% of its career NCO's; (c) French officer losses in Indochina currently equal the annual output of graduates from St. Cyr; and (d) 37% of the 1949 French military budget was spent on the Indochina operation.

4. The Chinese Communists have been training and equipping large numbers of Viet Minh troops in China and are supplying the Viet Minh considerable amounts of materiel. A small number of Chinese Communist advisory personnel wearing Viet Minh uniforms probably are already serving with the Viet Minh forces. In fact, official French sources report that Chinese Communist troops are already in Tonkin in some strength. Although the ability of the Chinese to furnish military equipment is limited, they should be able to make available to the Viet Minh enough small arms and artillery to give the Viet Minh a distinct superiority over present French forces. Viet Minh capabilities continue to be enlarged faster than the French have expanded their own. Unless French strength and military resources are substantially increased above those presently programmed, there is only a slight chance that the French can maintain their military position in the face of steadily

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increasing Viet Minh pressure during the period of about a year that would be required to strengthen Bao Dai's Government politically and to organize an effective Vietnamese army. For these and other reasons, there are grounds for questioning the French will to remain in Indochina.

5. The French position is further jeopardized by the fact that Viet Minh strength can be increased by successive increments of Chinese Communist troops (as well as materiel) as a counter to any increase in French capabilities. In particular, if the Viet Minh shows signs of failing to attain its military objective of driving the French out of Indochina or if the Bao Dai government begins to show considerable promise of winning nationalist supporters away from the Viet Minh, we believe that the Chinese Communists will resort to direct substantial military intervention in Indochina by committing "volunteer" troops for service with the Viet Minh unless other considerations intervene. Similarly, if US or other non-Communist military forces intervened directly in support of the French, the Chinese Communists almost certainly would intervene.

6. The Chinese Communists may well believe that they can intervene in force in Indochina without too great a risk of causing either US or UN military intervention or of precipitating a general war. From the Soviet point of view, there might be substantial advantages in involving the US in a full-scale war with the Chinese Communists. US strength would be further dissipated in a Far Eastern military operation, and the US might lose or alienate some of its allies and potential allies. There are considerations, however, that would tend to deter the Chinese Communists from direct intervention in the war. Chinese Communist intervention (a) might bring certain Asian countries into opposition to Communist China; (b) might antagonize nationalist elements in Indochina and thereby weaken Ho Chi Minh's control of his own party and his prospects for support from the rest of the country; (c) would involve the use of Chinese troops in a situation already developing favorably from the Communist point of view simply as a result of

supplying equipment and training for Viet Minh troops.

7. The intervention of Chinese Communist troops in force in support of the Viet Minh would render the military position of the French untenable. At present there are about 185,000 Chinese Communist troops in the Tonkin border area, and approximately half of these could be committed to operations in Indochina. Even a relatively small number of Chinese Communist troops (25,000-50,000) would enable the Communist forces to drive the French out of Tonkin in a relatively short time. French loss of Tonkin, even assuming the evacuation of French forces in substantial numbers, would jeopardize the French position in the remainder of Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia. The scale of Chinese Communist intervention, however, would be limited by anti-Communist activities in China and by Chinese Communist military commitments elsewhere.

8. In addition to a report [redacted] that Chinese Communist troops are already in Tonkin in some strength, there are at present many other indications of impending intervention in Indochina by the Chinese Communists. These include numerous reports of the recent movement of Chinese Communist armies to the Kwangsi-Tonkin border and of the concentration of armor in South China, the closing of French consulates in China under Chinese Communist pressure, Peiping charges of French border violations, Viet Minh and Chinese Communist accusations of persecution of the Chinese minority in Indochina, and the general Chinese Communist propaganda line that names Indochina, together with Korea, Japan and Formosa, as a base for "imperialist aggression" against China.

9. There is little doubt that a Viet Minh victory would lead to the transformation of Indochina into a Communist satellite. Ho Chi Minh is a Moscow-trained professional revolutionary and there have always been Communists in his government. At the present time, the Viet Minh regime is openly Communist in ideology and pro-Soviet in statements on foreign affairs. The recognition of the Ho

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regime by various international Communist groups as a full-fledged "people's democracy," formal recognition of the regime by Communist China and the Soviet bloc, and the failure of the Viet Minh to acknowledge the recognition tendered by Yugoslavia, all offer reasonably clear indications of the alignment of the Viet Minh leadership with the USSR, with Communist China, and the international Communist movement.

10. The strong probability is that the loss of Indochina to Communist control would mean the eventual loss of all mainland Southeast Asia, in the absence of Western assistance to the other countries of the area. Without such assistance, the proximity of well-trained Viet Minh forces would place nearly irresistible pressure upon Thailand, increasing the proclivity of Thai officialdom to accommodate

itself to the winning side. If Thailand were under Communist control, the Communist rebels in Malaya could be furnished military assistance that would be very likely to cause the British to lose control of the area. The Burmese government, already plagued by internal Communist problems, would find it difficult to resist diplomatic pressures backed up by both Chinese and Indochinese Communist forces on the borders of Burma. In addition, in Indonesia and the Philippines, the principal effect of Communist control of Indochina would be to strengthen indigenous Communist movements. Moreover, there might be a trend in Indonesia toward accommodation with the Communist bloc in Asia. As each successive country came under Communist influence, the non-Communist resistance in the remaining countries would be weakened.

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